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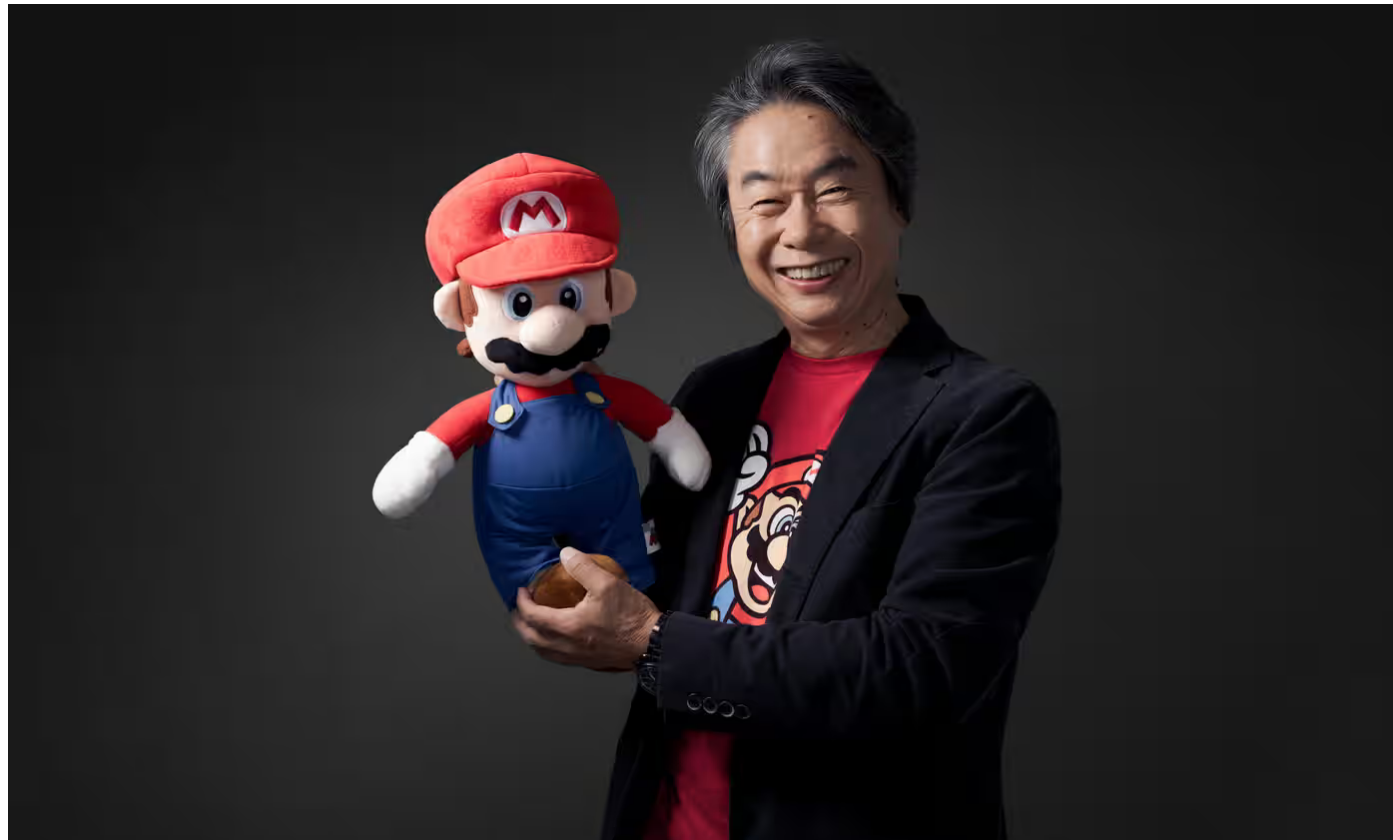
Culture

Interview

Nintendo's design guru Shigeru Miyamoto: 'I wanted to make something weird'

Keza MacDonald

Few people have influenced global pop culture as much as the creator of Mario and Zelda, widely considered the father of modern gaming. But when you have changed the world, what comes next?



📷 Push the button ... Shigeru Miyamoto and Mario. Photograph: Irwin Wong/The Guardian



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You can tell a Nintendo game not just from its feel - the satisfying swish of Link's sword in the Zelda games, the weight of Mario's jump - but by its look. They are bright, energetic, characterful. In Splatoon, the game-maker's most recent hit series, the shooter is reimagined as teams of transforming squids splattering arenas in glossy paint. Mario's red cap and blue overalls, originally designed to create a recognisable character with just a few pixels for 1981's arcade hit Donkey Kong, is now a stylistic signature - Nintendo's logo is the same shade of red. When you look into the company's department store outlets in Japan, a dozen colourful characters stare back at you from reams of merch: Animal Crossing cookware, [Super Mario](#) gloves, Zelda wallets and ties, Pikmin vases.

Next to the riot of colour that characterises its most famous games, Nintendo's HQ is conspicuously bland: two mid-rise white buildings in close proximity a half-hour's walk from Kyoto's central station, a grey [Nintendo](#) logo outside each. A small basket of Mario plush toys on the receptionist's desk is the only clue as to what's made in this building. Perhaps it's more interesting-looking upstairs, but that's a mystery to anyone who doesn't work here. As I am firmly but politely told when I ask if there's any chance of a tour, *nobody* goes up there.

I am here to meet Shigeru Miyamoto, the most influential game designer in the world. It was Miyamoto who designed that first pixelated Mario, and the games he starred in. He is best known for the creation of Mario, but he is also responsible for several of Nintendo's other hit games - among them The Legend of Zelda, whose latest instalment just topped many of 2023's game of the year lists. He has been involved in the design of all of the company's consoles, from 1983's Famicom (known outside Japan as the Nintendo Entertainment System) to its latest, the 130m-selling [Nintendo Switch](#). Since 1977, when Miyamoto joined the company, Nintendo has sold more than 1bn copies of games featuring his creations. He is the architect of several

generations' worth of childhood dreams.

Miyamoto is often called the Spielberg of games and Nintendo dubbed gaming's Pixar, but he doesn't like those comparisons. "Miyamoto is Miyamoto and Nintendo is Nintendo," was how he put it in an interview in February 2023. Like most Nintendo fans, I tend to imagine him wearing the broad, irresistible grin that he's worn on the stages of countless gaming conventions and in promotional videos. But in the past decade or so he's pulled back from the spotlight; he doesn't often do interviews and our meeting today has taken more than a year to arrange. Given the way he is talked about by other Nintendo creatives I've interviewed over the years, you get the impression of him as a revered creative elder, ready to pass judgment or rare praise - rather more intimidating than the smiling image we see on stage.



Costikyan left, Miyamoto and Greg Costikyan play the Wii Sports 2006 Electronic Arts event

Court in the act ... Miyamoto and Steven Spielberg playing wii tennis in 2006. Photograph: Branimir Kvartuc/Associated Press

In person, though, Miyamoto is welcoming and enthusiastic, though more reserved than you might expect from the world's most famous game designer. He does not love the spotlight. After his photoshoot, where he poses enthusiastically with a Mario soft toy, he tells me that he's never much liked being in front of a camera, despite his talent at performing for one. Wearing a Mario T-shirt under a black blazer, he meets me in a featureless meeting room at Nintendo's Kyoto HQ, flanked by no fewer than three Nintendo PR people from different regions, most of whom seem rather stunned to be near him. It is a few days after his 71st birthday, and Miyamoto is in something of a reflective mood. "If you ask me to talk about the early days, it'll go on for a while," he warns, when I ask for memories of his first years at the company. Miyamoto had studied industrial design at the Kanazawa College of Art in the 1970s, having dreamed as a doodling schoolkid of drawing manga for a living. "A lot of my classmates were going off to car manufacturers or electronics manufacturers," he recalls, "but I wanted to make something weird, something interesting, and that's how I came upon Nintendo."



In the 1970s, Nintendo was run by the formidable businessman Hiroshi Yamauchi, great-grandson of founder Fusajiro Yamauchi, who was in the process of transforming the company from a playing-card manufacturer to one that made electronic toys. Miyamoto was hired right at the dawn of the video game era. "The year after I joined, Space



... 1981's Donkey Kong.

Invaders was a huge hit. I spent a lot of time in arcades as a student, playing games, and so I was very interested in them," he remembers. "Two or three years in I was given a chance. I managed to create Donkey

Kong, and then game design became my real job."

Donkey Kong was an enormous global arcade hit, introducing two characters that are still instantly recognisable today: the titular gorilla, and his nemesis Jumpman - now known as Mario. It became the platform for Nintendo's transformation into the international gaming giant it is today. When the Famicom came out in the US in 1985, it debuted alongside the first Super Mario Bros game, which Miyamoto designed on graph paper with co-designer Takashi Tezuka. By the time the Super Famicom (Super Nintendo Entertainment System) came out in 1992, Nintendo was the world's leading video game company, and Miyamoto the world's leading video game designer.

■ I don't praise people a lot. I think working together on the next project is the biggest praise I can give

Unlike most game designers, Miyamoto was also involved with designing Nintendo's consoles. It is as a result of this joined-up approach that Nintendo's consoles have always felt tailor-made for the games

we play on them, whether petting pups on the touchscreen Nintendo DS console in Nintendogs, guiding Link through the 3D open world in Ocarina of Time, or bowling using motion-sensor controls in Wii Sports. Miyamoto lights up when he talks about even the tiniest details of designing those games and consoles, with that wide grin emerging again. He is certainly a big-ideas person, but he also gets a lot of joy out of finessing the fun: "In the beginning, I like to focus on the bigger picture, make sure the idea is

novel, and from there until the end - even sometimes after we've sent things to the factory - I like to brush up on the details. A lot of times they have to tell me, 'No more, enough!'"



Challenging you to a dual ... Miyamoto with the two-screen Nintendo DS in 2004. Photograph: Yoshikazu Tsuno/AFP/Getty

Attention to detail is something that Nintendo is very much known for. Where other video game companies rush games out on a shareholder-pleasing schedule, Nintendo has always been happy to take its time; a major new Mario or Zelda game will come out maybe every five years, but when they do arrive, they tend to be excellent. And as Miyamoto points out, you

can sell an excellent thing forever: 1985's original Super Mario Bros has been re-released several times and has sold more than 60m copies. You can still play it on Switch.

Novelty is a powerful driver for Miyamoto. He becomes especially animated when he recalls breakthrough moments from Nintendo's history. Still, throughout his 45 years at the company, he has always kept moving forward. In the past 10 years or so, he has been more involved with Nintendo's efforts outside video games, from Universal Studios' Super Nintendo World theme parks to Illumination's Super Mario Bros Movie, which was a huge hit this year. "[These days] I don't think of myself as a game designer," he explains. "I'm about finding unique opportunities for Nintendo. The way things work here is that, more so than having a plan and following it, we come across certain things and from there, we try to find our own new path. The movies, the amusement parks, I'm excited to see what kind of organic things result from those ... I'm still very new to [the movie] industry and I'm still learning, but I'm trying to read a lot of scripts these days and learn about how they are developed, to see how we can create uniquely Nintendo films."

Miyamoto has handed over the development of the game series that made him famous to other people, although he still oversees a lot of the games at Nintendo, particularly at the ideas stage. Development at Nintendo now is intergenerational, with people who grew up with Mario or Zelda or Animal Crossing now working on those games alongside their original designers: very few of Nintendo's top minds have ever moved on. When I spoke to fellow long-time Nintendo creative Shinya Takahashi in 2019, he gave the impression that, at that time, Miyamoto's role largely involved passing judgment on new prototypes. "He is not involved in the minute details of development, but does oversee entire projects and identifies major issues: 'This part is bad, this part is bad, THIS part is bad!'" he told me, with a smile. "If he says something's good, it's rare. He's actually a shy person, even when

if he says something's good, it's rare. He's actually a shy person; even when he thinks something is well done, he would not often say that to someone directly."

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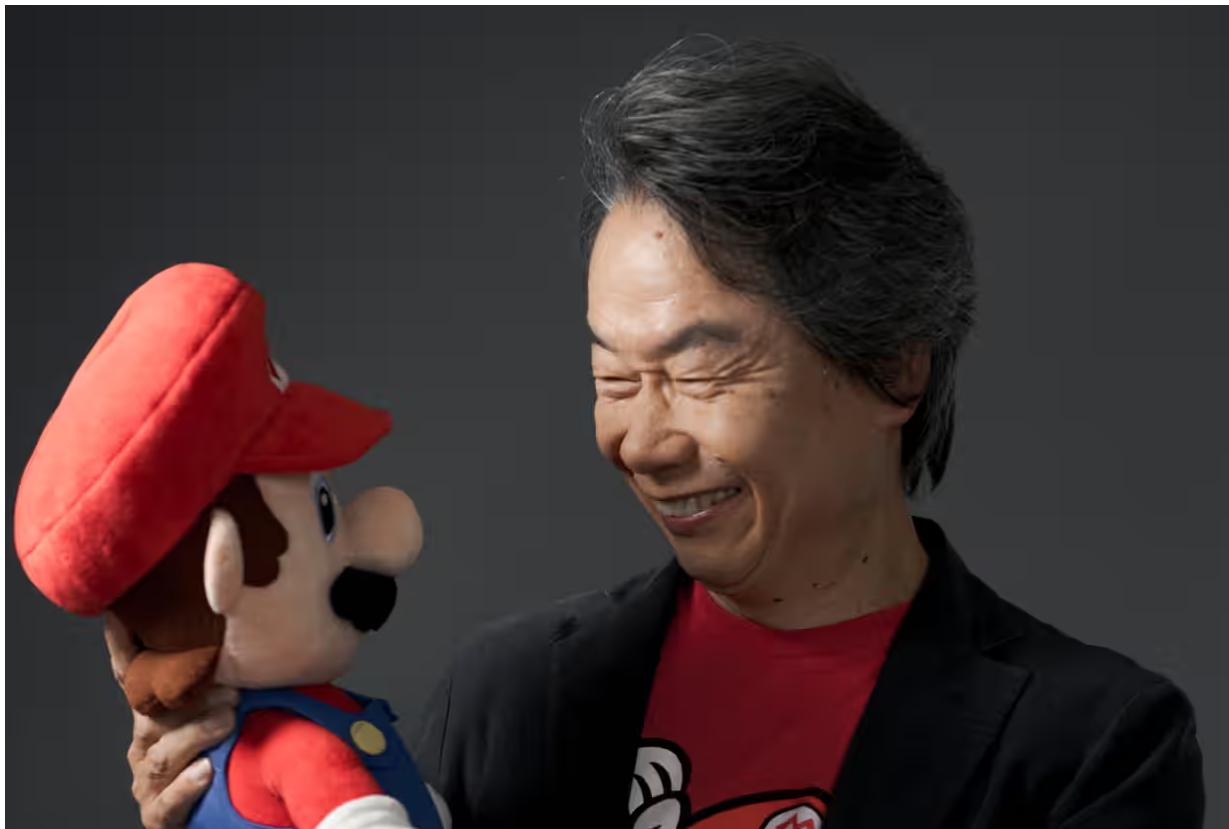
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Plumbing new heights ... Nintendo's biggest star, Mario, and Shigeru Miyamoto. Photograph: Irwin Wong/The Guardian

“I don’t praise people a lot. I realised that when I read that interview,” Miyamoto concurs. “But that said, I think working together on the next project is the biggest praise I can give.” So what kind of ideas earn his appreciation? “Things that are not even being thought of by other people, that nobody else is pursuing. Novel ideas,” he says, quickly. “Those kinds of ideas are worth brushing up to see if it’ll work out or not.”

■ ■ Even grandpas like me know what games are now ... People are having a broader understanding and acceptance of the genre

When Miyamoto started at Nintendo, video games were still yet to be defined. Arcades and early home consoles were sketching out the earliest versions of what would become

and acceptance of the term possible with virtual worlds. In 2023, most of the world plays video games, and the boundaries of what constitutes a game are once again becoming porous. The corporate world is encroaching on the universes of play that gamers have long inhabited, rebranding them as “the metaverse”. Everything from shopping and language learning to going for a run is being gamified through apps.

“Even grandpas like me know what games are now,” says Miyamoto. “Nowadays it’s very common to use PCs and smartphones, they’re used as pen and paper used to be. The border of video game is becoming less and less set in stone. People are having a broader understanding and acceptance of the term.”

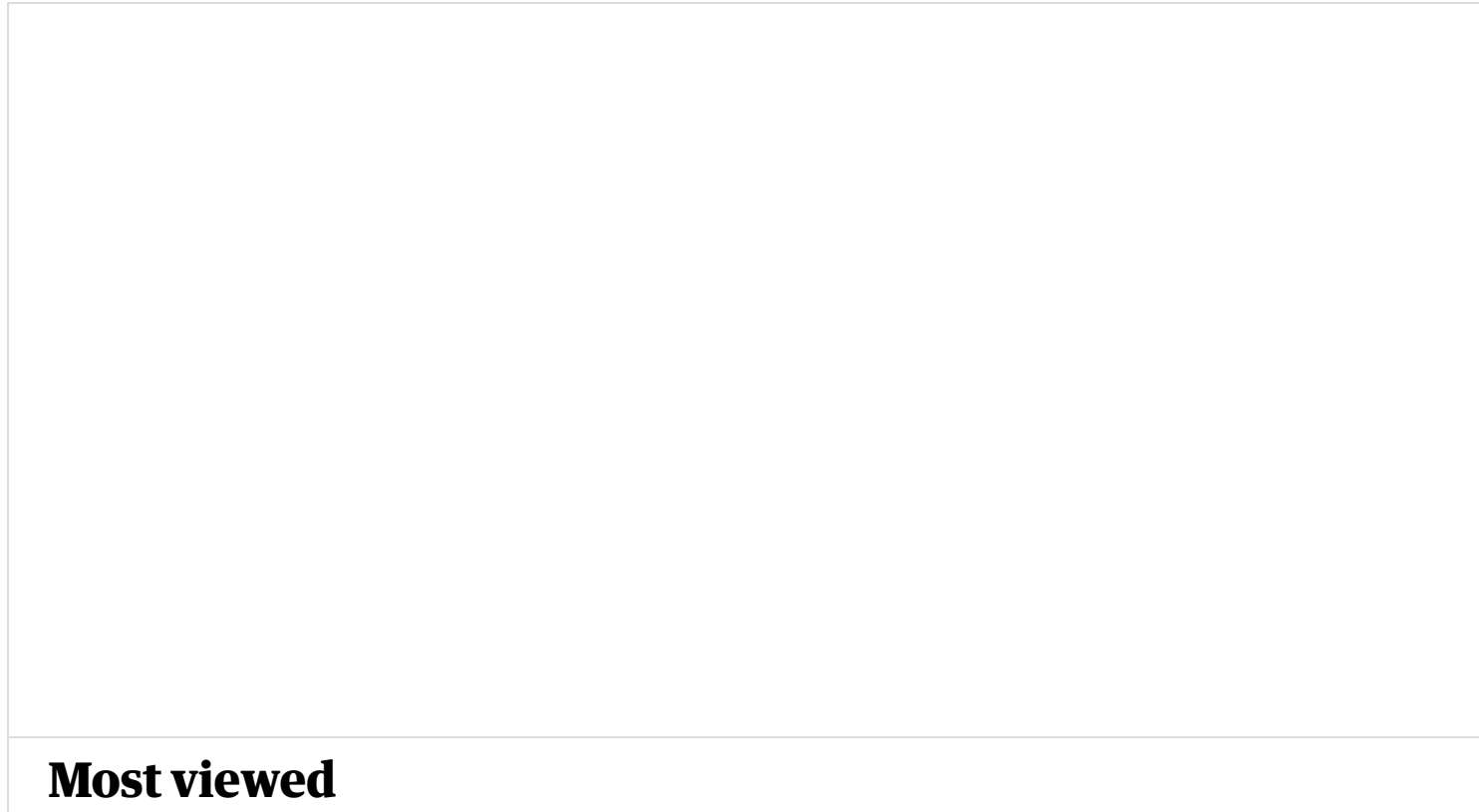


Main attraction ... Miyamoto at the opening ceremony of Super Nintendo World. Photograph: The Asahi Shimbun/Getty Images

I think I already know how Miyamoto will reply when I ask him if he's ever tempted to retire. Sure enough, he has no plans to do so; he still loves what he does. "More so than retiring, I'm thinking about the day I fall over," he says, with a smile. "In this day and age you have to think about things in a five-year timespan, so I do think about who I can pass things on to, in case something does happen.

"I'm really thankful that there is so much energy around things that I have worked on. These are things that have already gone out into the world ... they've been cultivated by others, other people have been raising them, helping them grow, so in that sense I don't feel too much ownership over them any more."

Mario, Link and his other creations may have taken on their own lives now, both inside and outside Nintendo's walls. But Shigeru Miyamoto is still synonymous with the company, and with its fun-first approach to games (and life). Even if he did retire, nobody would forget his influence - not that he sees it that way. "There is a scene in Iron Man where the president goes to his own company and the guard man doesn't let him in, and he points at the portrait and says: 'That's me!'" he laughs. "But I really hope that the teams I work with, at least, remember me as the creator of these things!"



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